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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 003460

SIPDIS

CAIRO PLEASE PASS TO GERALD CHEYNE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2015

TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [YM](#) [SO](#) [GTIP](#)

SUBJECT: SOMALI REFUGEES PROTEST UNHCR TREATMENT

REF: A. SANAA 2600

[¶](#)B. SANAA 1836

[¶](#)C. SANAA 1854

Classified By: DCM Nabeel Khoury for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶](#)1. (U) This is an action request. Please see paragraph 12.

[¶](#)2. (U) Summary. Since November 9, over 500 Somali refugees have been protesting in front of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) HQ in Sanaa. Encouraged by rumors that the USG soon will accept 70,000 Somali refugees for resettlement, the protestors have demanded immediate registration and better treatment by the UN agency. Thus far, negotiations have proved futile and there are no signs of the protest ending, perhaps indicating that life for some of the estimated 100,000 Somali refugees is becoming less and less tenable. End Summary.

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Protest Mostly Not Violent  
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[¶](#)3. (U) For the second time in two years, Somali refugees are staging a continuous strike in front of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) HQ in Sanaa. The protestors, who began their vigil on November 9, are demanding better treatment and immediate registration by the UNHCR. Citing security concerns, UNDP officials closed the Sanaa office on December 1.

[¶](#)4. (U) Since the sit-in began, there have been fewer than a half-dozen incidents of violence. The worst incident occurred on November 21, when some of the over 500 protestors threw rocks at MOI security forces who had cordoned off the area where they were camped. A bullet shot in the air to disperse the crowd injured one woman. An MOI spokesperson later acknowledged the incident as an accident.

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No Sign Of Relief  
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[¶](#)5. (C) UNHCR lead Protection Officer, Saado Quol, who is involved in negotiations with the protestors, said that dialogue thus far has been futile. "Every time we come to a peaceful resolution with their chosen representative, the protestors overthrow that person," he noted, "and we start over." UNHCR officials have met with protesters on six occasions to date.

[¶](#)6. (U) Promises by the UNHCR that six refugee reception centers will open across the country also have failed to stop the protest (ref a). The centers, to be run jointly by the UNHCR and MOI, will allow refugees to register with the UNHCR, assuring protection under Yemeni law and UNHCR protocols. Some centers will provide temporary housing and skills training.

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Protest Sparked by Frustration and Rumor  
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[¶](#)7. (U) Refugee leaders repeatedly have stated that the protest is aimed specifically at the UNHCR. The protestors' complaints include the UNHCR's delays in registering Somalis, unwillingness to communicate with refugee leaders, and lack of initiative either to resettle Somalis to third countries or to provide them with subsidies. On November 26, the government-controlled Yemen Observer newspaper quoted Abdullah Adam, a Somali community leader, as attributing the protests to the arrest of several undocumented refugees in Al-Safya, a Sanaa neighborhood populated by Somalis. In the past year, post has received increased reports of undocumented Somali refugees being arrested.

[¶](#)8. (C) Quol, however, attributes the protests to a Somali website that announced USG plans to re-settle 70,000 Somali refugees. "It comes up every time we negotiate with them," he said. "They are insisting that we register them because without their documents, they are afraid that they will be left behind."

Refugees Outstaying Their Welcome?

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¶19. (U) There are approximately 68,000 registered and 50,000 undocumented Somali refugees in Yemen. The ROYG continues to grant *prima facie* refugee status to Somali refugees who arrive in the country, allowing them the right to live and work anywhere they like. In reality, most Somali refugees live in Aden, port cities, or ghettos throughout the country and are relegated to jobs that Yemenis will not take (such as working on the Sanaa sewage system).

¶10. (C) In the past year there have been signs that the ROYG's attitude might be changing. UNHCR sources reported considerable initial MOI opposition to the new reception centers, coupled with a secret report suggesting a harsher ROYG stance towards refugees (ref a). Furthermore, ROYG officials, including Minister of Human Rights Amat al-Alim al-Soswa, have repeatedly warned embiffs that Yemen cannot keep supporting Somali refugees (refs b, c).

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Comment and Action Request

¶11. (C) Currently, there are no indications of the protest abating. Although the website announcement may have sparked the protest, it is the other refugee complaints (not without warrant) that are fueling it. Yemeni and foreign embassy colleagues had in the past viewed the UNHCR Sanaa office, unlike its Aden counterpart, as being poorly managed and difficult to deal with. Many point to the large numbers of unregistered refugees (which the UNHCR attributes to the ROYG's resistance to opening the new refugee centers) as evidence of this. This perception, however, has been slowly changing since a new staff took charge of operations in November 2004.

¶12. (C) Action Request: Although the protest is expected to subside sometime in late December once the UNHCR begins to implement its oft-stated plan to register all of Yemen's Somali refugees, post would appreciate Department's guidance on the website's announcement to pass to involved parties and help alleviate the situation. End Comment and Action Request.  
Krajeski